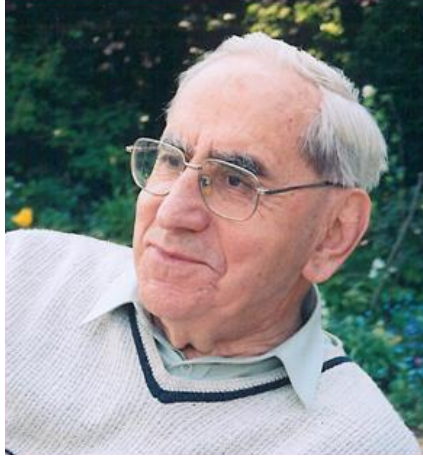


†Boris Christa
(21 February 1925 – 19 August 2008)

In memoriam



Boris Christa was born in Sofia to a Bulgarian father and a British mother, but left the country of his birth for good when only a few months old. His early childhood was spent in Stuttgart, where his maternal grandfather had taught English for many years, and where his mother found employment as a secretary at the British consulate. In 1937, she moved with her two youngest children to England, and Boris was sent at the age of 12 as a boarder to Wynstones, a Rudolf Steiner school in the environs of Gloucester. In 1944, his plans to study medicine at London University were set aside when he was called up for military service and selected for officer training. He was commissioned a lieutenant on the eve of VE day and, thanks to his fluency in German, was posted to the garrison of a camp for prisoners of war. It was at the suggestion of his commanding officer that he applied to the Inter-Services Russian Course, set up to equip suitable officers with the language skills necessary for liaison work with the Soviet Army in occupied Germany. After graduation he was despatched to Berlin, and soon afterwards was attached as British liaison officer and interpreter to the Soviet military mission at Bad Salzufflen. The eighteen months he spent travelling in

the suite of General Konovalov provided the material for many famous Christa anecdotes in later years.

Boris left the army with the rank of major and went up to Cambridge as an exhibitioner of Trinity College to read Slavonic Studies. He completed the Modern and Medieval Languages tripos and on graduation in 1949 at the suggestion of Elizabeth Hill, his teacher since his days in the Inter-Services Russian Course, applied for a lectureship in Russian at the University of Melbourne. He arrived in Australia with his young wife Ruth in 1950 to join Nina Christesen in the department she had created from scratch in 1946. The relationship between the lecturer-in-charge and her younger colleague was at times a troubled one, but it was thanks to their combined efforts that the Melbourne Russian Department grew in size and reputation over the next decade. Boris, by now the father of two children, was able to pursue his research into Andrei Bely and the Symbolist movement in his periods of overseas study leave, taking his MA in 1955 and eventually receiving his PhD from Cambridge in 1963. While he was on leave in Cambridge in 1962 he accepted appointment as associate professor in charge of Russian at the University of Auckland, arriving there early in 1963. The move from Melbourne was particularly welcome to him following his divorce, and it was during his sojourn in New Zealand that he married Christa (Tanya) Wuttke, a Melbourne graduate then teaching in the Auckland German Department.

From Auckland, Boris moved in 1966 to Brisbane to take up the newly-created chair of Russian at the University of Queensland, where he spent the rest of his working life. Inheriting a small and hard-pressed language-teaching unit, he presided over its growth into a fully-fledged university department, complete with honours and postgraduate programs, and with a full-time staffing establishment of five. Throughout his tenure of the chair and headship, he was a respected member of the University's Academic Board and served on a number of its committees, as well as representing it as a governor of Cromwell College for many years.

From the start, his teaching was concentrated in the area of Russian cultural history, and in nineteenth-century literature in particular. Pushkin, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Chekhov were his special favourites, and it was perhaps the knowledge that he had succeeded in sharing his enthusiasm for them with successive generations of students that brought him the greatest satisfaction. At the same time, he took an active interest in his department's language acquisition program, and in the late sixties organized the first of the field trips on Soviet

cruise vessels intended to provide students with a rare opportunity to practice their language skills in a Russian-speaking environment. Outside the classroom, his home became the venue for a variety of departmental activities, including the memorable Russian Easter parties at which Boris and Tanya (and their two daughters) entertained the entire student body.

Boris's research was at first focussed on the poetry of Russia's Silver Age: his doctoral thesis became the basis of a monograph (*The Poetic World of Andrey Bely*, 1977) which was one of the first substantial studies in English and more than thirty years later remains a standard item in bibliographies. This he followed up with an edited volume *Andrey Bely Centenary Papers* (1980); but by then Boris's research interests had taken a new direction, and it was henceforth his investigations of the covert and symbolic modes of literary communication that were to dominate his output. His original and exemplary studies of the use of money in Dostoevsky or of internal and external spaces in Tolstoy, or (most often) of the function of what he called 'vestimentary markers' – the clothes worn by characters in works of literature – gained him wide recognition, as evidenced by reviews and citations, and by invitations to participate in conferences and contribute to prestigious publications like *The Cambridge Companion to Dostoevskii* (2002). Among his other publications are pioneering studies of the Russian diaspora in Australia.

One of the founding members of the Australia and New Zealand Slavists' Association, Boris served as its president from 1982 to 1988, and also (from 1983) as its representative on the International Committee of Slavists. From 1972 until his retirement, he served as Honorary Secretary of the Association Internationale des Langues et Littératures Modernes, and from 1985 as a member of the Executive of the International Council for Soviet and East European Studies. He was also a past president of the International Dostoevsky Society. Outside the profession, he was active in the affairs of the Brisbane Russian community, and instrumental on their behalf in persuading the University to provide a home for George Virine's statue of St Vladimir commissioned by them in 1988.

Boris was fortunate to retire when he did. The Australian university of the 1990s, with its restructurings and rationalizations, he found uncongenial enough; the Australian university of the 2000s, with its philistine corporatism, resembled even less the kind of institution he thought it should be. He was fortunate too to enjoy a long and productive retirement. As Professor Emeritus and an Hon-

orary Research Consultant in the School of Languages and Comparative Cultural Studies, he continued to publish regularly and present papers at international conferences, most recently in 2007. For a brief period he found himself appointed special consultant to the Cape York international space consortium in its negotiations with Glavkosmos. He and Tanya were able to travel in Russia much more widely than had been possible in the past, and thanks to daily doses of the SBS Russian television news he became an avid (if somewhat too sanguine) observer of post-Soviet affairs. He took an avuncular interest in the fortunes of Russian at Queensland and at a time when its future seemed under threat played a leading part in setting up the Pushkin Foundation, a community organization dedicated to supporting the study of Russian language and culture; he served as its patron until his death.

Throughout his full and varied life, Boris Christa approached the living of it with unquenchable verve and *brio*. When in 1996, at the age of 71, he was diagnosed with chronic lymphocytic leukaemia and told he could expect to live another 3–5 years, it was entirely characteristic that he should keep this secret from all but his immediate family and succeed almost by sheer force of will in beating the disease into remission, until open heart surgery at the beginning of 2008 once more lowered his defences. He died at home, surrounded by his family, in his eighty-fourth year, and is survived by his wife, his three daughters (his only son having died in tragic circumstances in 1979) and his three grandchildren.

John McNair